A White Paper on

Organisational Culture

As if' rules

Rules such as these are explicit and designed 'from the outside', as if were. But we believe that there may also be tacit rules which underpin culture, similar to Scott-Morgan's 'unspoken rules of the game'. Because they are not explicit or articulated their status is ambiguous. We prefer to call them 'as if' rules: cultures operate *as if* it was being generated by a set of rules.

After all, as far as we know, geese do not apply Reynolds' three rules when flying south; Phoenix fire-fighters do not mentally rehearse their rules before entering a burning building; workshop members do not check the flipchart before speaking. However, they may act *as if* they were using the rules. The rules provide a simple and convenient way of making the behaviour visible. Indeed, they do something more, for once laid bare in this way the rules are open to scrutiny.

Expressing culture

For some time now we have been experimenting with the use of a small set of simple rules to express the essence of an organisation's culture. The approach seems to be very successful: clients take to the idea very readily and the rules which are generated seem to strike a deep chord with those involved.

The procedure is quite simple. After employing a cultural audit/inqury, we give a brief outline of the simple rules approach and invite participants to brainstorm possible rules which we record. The usual brainstorming rules apply: no comment or criticism of other people's contributions, anything is acceptable, and so on. Our role is to record the suggestions and occasionally invite people to reframe their contributions so that they are in the form of a rule.

Our experience to date suggests that there is a point, when these rules dry up. It is worth allowing a pause for people to find their 'second wind' and generate more.

Next, we invite people to vote for the rules which would seem to best generate the current culture. Everyone has, say, four votes which they can cast in any way they like. We may give out adhesive dots or just ask people to tick against the rules which seem 'best' to them. People can give all four votes to one rule or spread them about among up to four different rules.

So far, the results have always been clear-cut. Typically three or four rules have stood out from the rest. Sometimes there is one or two which tie for fourth or fifth place; but the top three always seem obvious once the voting is over. Furthermore, we have not had any dissent when the process is over; everyone seems to be satisfied.

One thing which we have noticed, though, is that the top rules often come from rules identified from the latter part of the facilitation. Take time to allow the deep rules to surface as they are usually more representative of the culture; that is why we try to encourage the brainstorming process to continue even when it seems to have run out of steam.

The result of the process is a set of rules which encapsulate the culture and which can be inspected by everybody. The heart of the culture has been made explicit and tangible. Questions can then be asked: Do we like them? Should we change them? How can we change them? How can we reinforce them? Are the behaviours they 'generate' the behaviours which the organisation wants or needs?

For instance, one client identified with the following rules:

- o   Never give up on a client
- o   Be honest
- o   If in doubt, take the risk
- o   Be respectful

They were justifiably pleased with their performance as an organisation and felt that these rules encapsulated what was unique about their organisation. They wanted to reinforce and build upon what they had articulated.

Other sets of rules give a less rosy picture:

- o   Don't make mistakes
- o   Work long hours - it shows commitment
- o   Cover your back
- o   Don't put your head above the parapet

This organisation was unhappy with its current culture and experienced performance issues, but the point remains the same: once the rules have been articulated change becomes a possibility.

Changing culture

Describing culture is rarely an end in itself. The purpose is usually because of some felt need to change or at least to find out if change is necessary. A separate article would be needed to do justice to the subject of cultural change. Here we can do no more than sketch out a few of the issues. Most importantly, attitudes to change vary in the traditional and new paradigm approaches.

From the classical perspective it is necessary to describe (diagnose) both the current and desired culture, and then formulate a plan to move from one to the other. *Only after all this has been done can change begin*. One organisation we worked with insisted on following this process; it took a year to complete and just when they were ready to begin 'implementation' a major re-organisation occurred and the project was no longer appropriate. Major change programmes increasingly fall foul of this sort of outside influence – continual change leads to and the grand plans of organisation development specialists crumble to dust.

There is another way. Consider the following quotation:

Culture is made visible by culture-shock, by subjecting oneself to situations beyond one's normal interpersonal competence and objectifying the discrepancy as an entity; it is delineated through an inventive realization of that entity following the initial experience. (Wagner 1975:9)

Roy Wagner is writing about the experience of the anthropologist when encountering a different set of practices and assumptions in the host society during field work. He could equally be speaking of any member of an organisation wishing to discover more about that organisation's culture. Making culture visible is an important part of beginning the negotiations which might lead to culture change.

Indeed, our view is that 'describing culture' does not precede culture change—it is a part of the process of changing the culture. As our culture is made explicit we will inevitably start to change and the more people who are involved in the process of discovery and description, the faster the change will occur. That is why we employ participative forms of inquiry rather than diagnostic questionnaires.

When people inquire together they find themselves actively engaged in an organic process of change which offers them the possibility of co-creating a new culture and a new future. The creative and collaborative approaches Pervue employs are a key resource for this approach to change

Cultural Audits

Measuring Company Cultures

In times of mergers and acquisitions, cultural due diligence is almost never completed and yet can be the make or break factor of success.

Our approach to understanding the 'how to' within two companies is as follows:

We propose the following activities should take place to identify differences in culture and the implications associated with these differences. Identifying these cultures gives us the first steps towards creating a new culture – one which supports change and maximises performance.

We proposed that in order to understand the current cultures the following activity takes place;

To elicit the attitudes, values, beliefs & strategies of each company, a survey should be carried out by way of 121 interviews (individuals to be agreed) with the following information collected;

- What values are held by each company?
- What beliefs are held by each company?
- What strategies are employed such as;
  - Motivations – necessity/possibility
  - Focus of attention – self/others
  - Frame of reference – internal/external
  - Relation to time – in time/through time/past/future
  - Focus of interests – people/clients/marketplace
  - Movement – away from/towards
  - Patterns – similarity/difference
  - Chunk size – large/small – specifics/generalities
- What behaviours are evident?
- What working environment is evident within each company?

A general report on findings and implications is completed and made available for further discussion.

Our next step would be to run an externally facilitated workshop dedicated to;
- Understanding current cultures
- Exploring modelling other successful cultures
- Exploring a new culture needed for the new UK company
- Agree on how to implement and measure – who/what

At the end of this facilitation, we would advise those present to agree an individual responsible for the continue benchmarking and measurement of cultural change